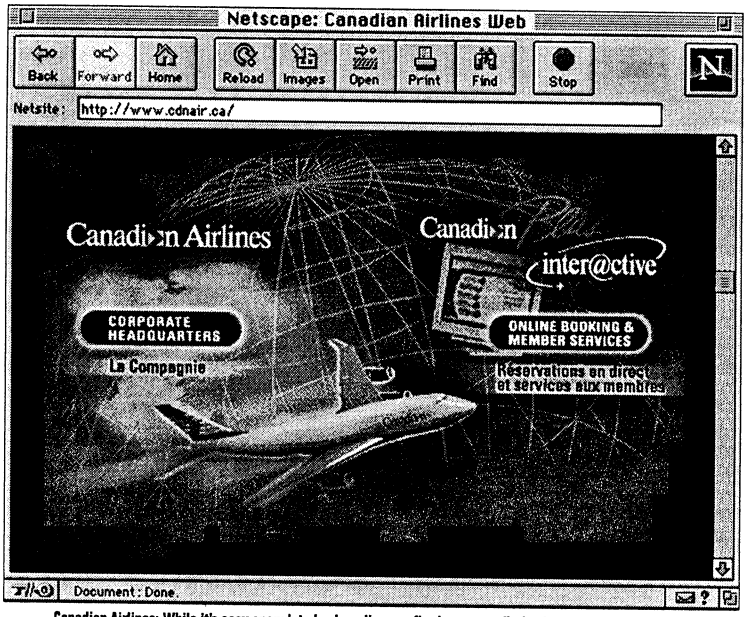
NET RESULTS

On-line transactions a tangled Web



Canadian Airlines: While it's easy enough to book on-line, confirming a cancellation is a whole different story

BY JIM CARROLL

The Internet is entering a new phase as on-line transactions become a reality on many corporate Web sites.

Yet I'm not sure that in the rush to add such capabilities to their Web sites that many organizations are spending enough time thinking through what they are trying to accomplish. The result is that they risk losing the confidence of their customers.

Organizations seem to be missing the point that aside from the ability to conduct a transaction, they have to ensure that they don't do anything to cause their customers to have a negative experience. And I've had quite a few of those recently with transactions I've conducted on-line. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Why can't they realize that if they charge me more via the Web, I'll go back to my travel agent?

I travel quite a bit, and frequently find myself turning to airline and car rental Web sites to do my bookings. I've overcome the discomfort I first had with the concept of "virtual ticketing", and find it remarkably convenient to book my ticket on the Internet and then simply show up at the airport with a confirmation number.

I no longer really worry that my car or airline reservation will be lost in the cyber-ether; the more you use these on-line services, the more you realize that organizations have built solid, stable transaction capabilities into their site. I'm also not concerned that some super-punk-cyber-geek-uber-hacker is going to steal my credit card number. I realize that I'm probably more at risk going to a local restaurant and handing my card to a waiter.

For an airline or car rental agency, the Web makes eminent sense. They save money by not having to pay a commission to a travel agent. Not only that, but because the Web site transaction is linked directly into their reservation system, they save more money in the performance of the transaction itself. That is why we see so many organizations rushing to do business on-line.

What bugs me is this: Why can't they pass those cost savings on to me? Indeed, why don't they realize that if they actually charge me more via the Web than I would spend through a travel agent, I'll do the natural thing and go back to the travel agent.

Case in point: Thrifty Car Rental. I've booked a number of cars on their site. Yet it's been my experience that when booking on-line, I am charged a *higher* rental rate than I can get through my travel agent. Why can't they discount the Web rental rate, in order to encourage people to use it?

This lack of foresight is evident throughout their site. I've got a frequent renter plan with Thrifty, what they call their "Blue Chip" customer plan. This lets you get to the airport and simply walk away with the key, since they've already got your licence, credit card and other pertinent information on file.

But when booking a car on-line, can I specify my Blue Chip number? Not a chance – leading to the ludicrous situation where I must call their 1-800 number *after* making my Internet reservation to ensure they get my number. It's completely ridiculous. Why wouldn't you just call the 1-800 number in the first place?

Negative reinforcement seems to be a theme of the Thrifty site. The worst example of that involved a not-so-recent time in which I booked a van on-line for a family vacation – only to discover there was a $10 a day surcharge of which I was not advised when booking through the Web site.

Thrifty certainly won't see me coming back to them via the Internet, until they realize that they have to work hard to encourage an on-line relationship.

I've also had difficulty with Canadian Airlines. Recently, I had to cancel a flight that I had booked through their Web site. The cost of the flight was a fairly significant sum, well into four figures.

It wasn't until I started yelling at various people that the airline took me seriously, and realized their systems weren't working as well as they might.

When you book a flight, you get a confirmation number, assuring you the transaction went through. Do you get the same degree of comfort on cancellation? Not at all. In fact, all I got was a Web page telling me that the booking was cancelled. There was no confirmation number, or anything that I could use as proof that the cancellation would be processed.

Five weeks later, after discovering a credit *still* had not been applied to my card, I finally got frustated enough to call the airline. First, they put me on to someone in customer service, who couldn't help me out. I then had to call accounting. "The Internet?" they said. "We don't have anything to do with that. You should have called in to cancel."

Clearly, while the airline had rolled out its Web-based transaction system, it had done little to educate the rest of the employees as to what was going on. It wasn't until I started yelling at various people that the airline took me seriously, and realized their systems weren't working as well as they might.

The key point? Their implementation has done little to inspire my confidence of transacting with them on-line.

There are many examples like this – organizations rushing to build transaction capabilities into their Web site, but in doing so, missing the mark by not providing the customer assurance that everything is A-OK.

My point is this – as your corporate Web site makes the transition from a purely marketing-driven site to a transaction site, you've got to think things through, or you'll lose your customers' confidence – and send them back to their traditional transaction channel.

Jim Carroll is the co-author of about two dozen books on the Internet, including the bestselling Canadian Internet Handbook, *for which the sixth, 1999 edition is in progress, and* Small Business Online, *a book filled with strategic guidance for the entrepreneur. He can be reached on the Internet at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com, and has an on-line site containing many other articles concerning the Internet at www.jimcarroll.com.*